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Developments in Indochina

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State Dept. review completed

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA*(Information as of 1500)*Page

SOUTH VIETNAM

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COSVN has issued new orders on Communist tactics in South Vietnam. Fighting flared northwest of Saigon and west of Hue over the weekend. President Thieu discussed elections with a French correspondent last week. Two South Vietnamese parties are making a last-ditch effort to join forces.

CAMBODIA

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Phnom Penh is calm, and a state of emergency is in effect. Government troops are moving to clear Route 2 and the Mekong River area south of Neak Luong.

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LAOS

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The Lao Communists say US prisoners will be released in Laos and not in North Vietnam. Fighting flared in the south over the weekend. Souvanna has asked for a meeting with Souphanouvong or his envoy.

The Pathet Lao are condemning US air activity.

NORTH VIETNAM

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Communist spokesmen are responding to US charges about Hanoi's infiltration and supply activity. The first sections of a new article by Le Duan are available in Washington.

SOUTH VIETNAM

The latest policy guidelines from COSVN provide further evidence that the Communists anticipate heavier military action in the next few weeks.

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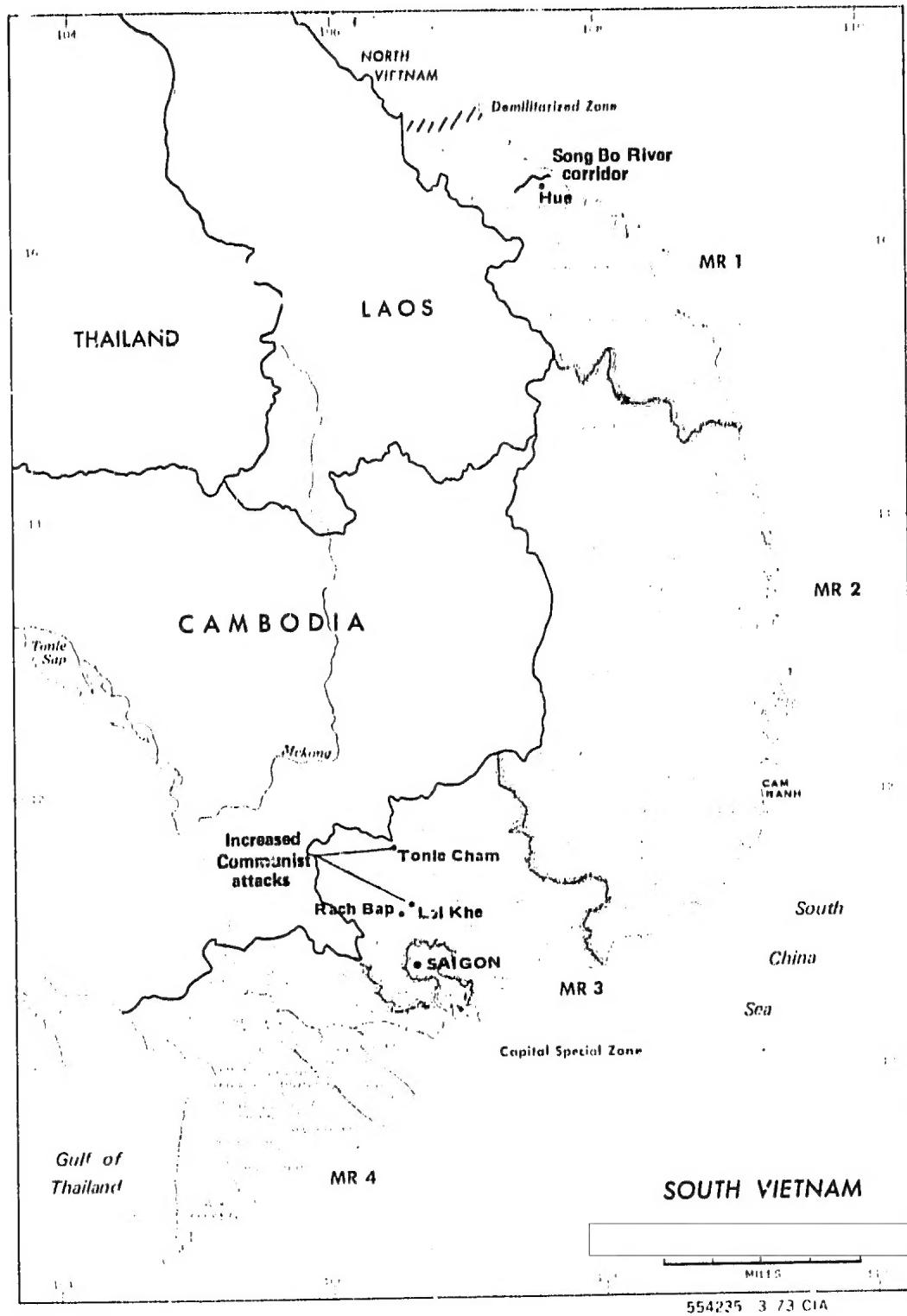
[redacted] in mid-March COSVN issued a supplement to its earlier directive on Communist political tactics in the cease-fire period. The supplement stated that after all US prisoners are home, "temporary deadlocks" are likely to occur in negotiations and Saigon will launch "operations to encroach upon our areas." The Communists allegedly are strengthening their main forces with men and equipment from North Vietnam so as to "stop" the South Vietnamese and "maintain the limits of the cease-fire agreement."

The new order goes on to state that South Vietnamese operations will give the Communists "many good opportunities to initiate an offensive to tilt the balance of strength and move civilians into our areas." Such action will be aimed at capturing hamlets and villages rather than larger stretches of territory and will be touted as "retaliatory."

The supplement asserts that the earlier directive proclaiming a new era of political struggle is still in effect. It indicates, in fact, that the Communists are planning to emphasize the political side of the effort for several months in the belief that they will acquire better access to the population as time progresses. Military operations are to play a secondary role in this scenario.

Nonetheless, the supplement clearly suggests that military action will remain an important part of the over-all struggle and that cadre are to prepare for heavier military action after the US prisoner exchanges are completed. In addition,

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[redacted]

the supplement indicates that whenever they are able to do so, the Communists intend to make it appear that their side acted defensively. [redacted]

[redacted]

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The Military Situation

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Heavy fighting occurred early in the weekend north of Saigon and northwest of Hue, but it has since slackened somewhat. Communist troops launched strong attacks against a government outpost at Rach Bap and a base camp at Lai Khe in Binh Duong Province. These attacks have now eased, but the Communists are applying heavy military pressure farther north against a Ranger camp at Tonle Cham in Tay Ninh Province. The Rangers have been unable to get fresh supplies or to evacuate their wounded because of heavy Communist ground fire, but they still have control of the camp.

The government's military commander for the region, General Minh, said on 16 March that he has ordered heavy artillery fire and air strikes and that he will continue them until the North Vietnamese units pull back. Earlier the South Vietnamese had protested the enemy actions in the area before the Four Power Joint Military Commission (FPJMC) and Minh had warned that if the attacks continued, he would react strongly. The Communist delegates on the Commission so far have successfully prevented any investigation of the fighting, according to the US Embassy.

Northwest of Hue, Communist units increased their ground and artillery attacks along the Song Bo River corridor. South Vietnamese control of this area has hindered Communist infiltration and resupply into the lowlands from their mountain bases. Although fighting has subsided in the past 24 hours, renewed clashes are likely. [redacted]

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Thieu on Elections

In an interview that apparently was recorded last week with a French news correspondent, President Thieu reiterated his desire for early elections with Communist participation in order to "settle the problem of South Vietnam once and for all." Thieu refused, however, to be specific on details of the elections, noting that these must be decided in the context of other issues, including North Vietnamese troop withdrawal. Thieu expressed confidence that the elections would demonstrate that the South Vietnamese people, by clear and free choice, do not accept the Communist ideology. He went on to add, perhaps in an oblique reference to some of his recent decree actions, that if the people do not want a Communist regime, "they must give me all the means to overcome the Communists in this political battle." [REDACTED]

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Another Opposition Alliance Forming?

Two of South Vietnam's better organized parties, the Worker-Farmer Party (WFP) and the Progressive Nationalist Movement (PNM), appear to be making a last-ditch effort to forge an alliance to meet the criteria of the government's decree on political parties by the 27 March deadline. A preliminary organizational meeting, which took place on 14 March, was attended by labor leader Tran Quoc Buu of the WFP, representatives of the PNM, and leaders of various small parties associated with Catholic laymen and with the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects. Another meeting, set for 18 March, was to decide whether to launch the alliance, and if so what its name, internal rules, and program should be.

Both the WFP and PNM have made previous soundings among the smaller religious parties, but this is the first indication that they have been in

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contact with one another. Only a week ago Buu and PNM leader Nguyen Ngoc Huy were both talking of letting the deadline pass. Both parties are moderate and their members have been under considerable pressure to join up with the government's Democracy Party. Even if the new alliance gets off the ground, it is likely to have trouble meeting the requirement that it win 20 percent of the total vote in an election.

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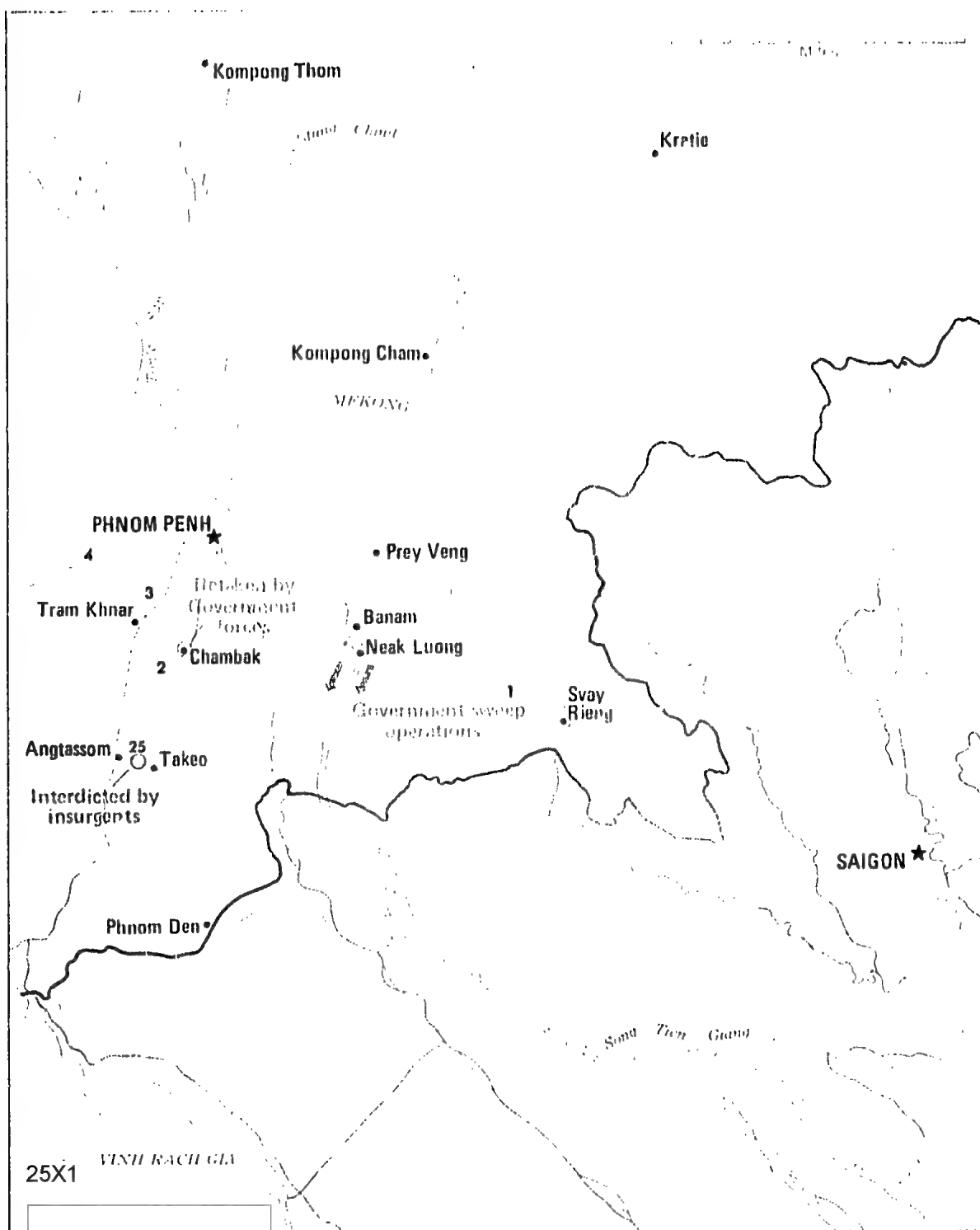
Phnom Penh is calm following the bombing of the presidential palace on Saturday and brief student disorders earlier in the day. The Khmer insurgents marked the third anniversary of Sihanouk's ouster yesterday by lightly shelling the outskirts of Phnom Penh, but no other significant actions were reported. The state of emergency declared by President Lon Nol on 17 March remains in effect, as does a dusk-to-dawn curfew. The government has also suspended publication of all privately owned newspapers until further notice and is keeping the city's security forces on maximum alert.

There is confusion over the identity and motives of the Cambodian air force officer responsible for the bombing of the presidential palace. He was recently expelled from flight training for disciplinary reasons, but there is no evidence linking him and the insurgents. The government claims the pilot is the husband of one of Sihanouk's daughters, although the US Embassy has no information to substantiate this. Several relatives of Sihanouk in the Phnom Penh area have been arrested, and a number of other members of the royal family have been removed from their military positions.

The attack on the palace was preceded by violence that broke out during a mass meeting of students and teachers called to decide whether protests against the government's economic policies should be continued. Following a scuffle between some students and soldiers, several grenades exploded, killing at least two students and injuring many others. Popular reaction to the incident so far has been mild, but additional student and teacher demonstrations are planned for later this week.

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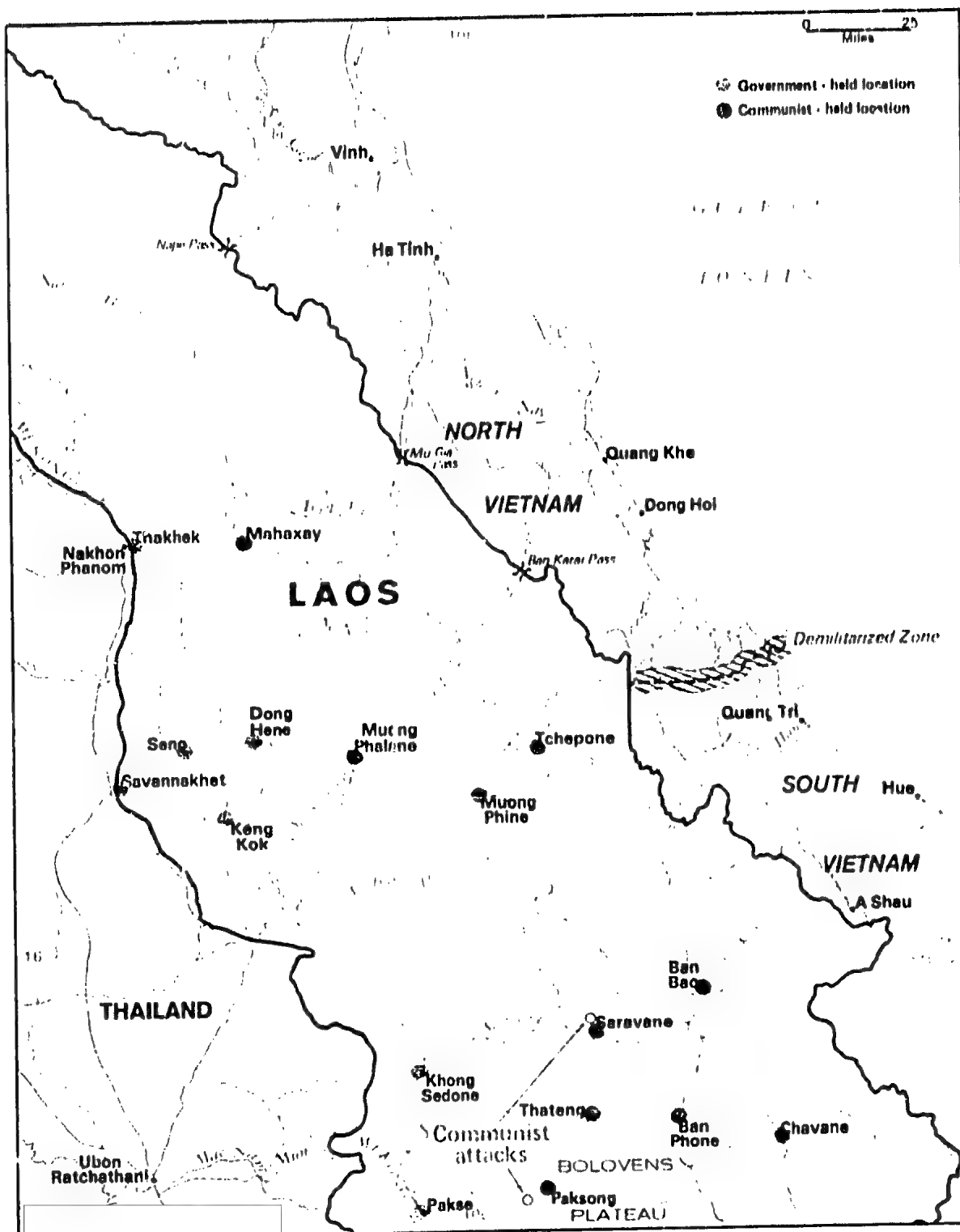
Government troops moving eastward from Tram Khnar reoccupied the town of Chambak on 17 March. No significant insurgent resistance was encountered. Plans now call for the eight-battalion force to attempt to clear Route 2 south to the provincial capital of Takeo. To the west of Takeo, the Khmer insurgents have encircled the government garrison at Angtassom and have cut Route 25 some three miles to the east of the town. South of Takeo, meanwhile, the insurgents continue to attack government outposts near Phnom Den along the South Vietnamese border.

Elsewhere, the government operation to clear both sides of the Mekong River from Neak Luong to the South Vietnam border began on 16 March. Two three-battalion forces are moving south, one along each bank of the river. At last report, both were making slight progress against only light enemy resistance. Mekong River pilots have refused to sail from South Vietnam until better security has been established in the Neak Luong area.

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LAOSCommunist Statement on US Prisoners

The US Embassy in Vientiane has learned that US prisoners of war in Laos will be released by the Lao Communists in Laos and not by the North Vietnamese in Hanoi.

[redacted] a Communist official in Vientiane, acting under orders from his headquarters in Sam Neua, said on 17 March that the US had already been informed of the names and numbers of US prisoners in Laos--apparently a reference to the list of US prisoners in Laos released last January by North Vietnam. He added that these prisoners would be released under procedures that will be set forth in the military protocol currently being negotiated in Vientiane.

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The Military Situation

Fighting flared in the south over the weekend as Communist ground attacks forced a government battalion to pull back from positions southwest of Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau. North of the Plateau, Communist units drove government troops from defenses near Saravane and continued to foil government attempts to occupy a village some 20 miles northeast of Khong Sedone. Field commanders in the central panhandle reported steady skirmishing southeast of Thakhek, and according to belated reports enemy troops attacked several positions north of Dong Hene on 16 March. Lao T-28s supported government units in both regions.

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Negotiations

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It is unlikely that Souvanna, whose political negotiating team is dominated by rightists, is genuinely surprised at the lack of progress so far. He may not, however, have expected the Communists to wait this long before sending senior negotiators back to begin high-level discussions on a new government.

While talks on political arrangements remain deadlocked the two sides have agreed to exchange draft protocols covering details of military matters such as a prisoner exchange and the withdrawal of foreign troops. The drafts will be submitted for comparison and discussion at the next meeting of the military group on 19 March. Preliminary agreement may be reached on some arrangements but the Communists will probably withhold final acceptance of a military protocol until the political issues are resolved.

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More on US Reconnaissance Flights

Like the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao are condemning US military air activity. In an official statement broadcast on 17 March, they claimed that "US-Vientiane aircraft" have conducted numerous "reconnaissance and bombing" missions in violation of the Lao peace agreement. The statement warned that the US and Vientiane would have to bear "full responsibility for all consequences" if the cease-fire violations did not stop. This is the second official reaction in ten days to US reconnaissance overflights.

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NORTH VIETNAM

Vietnamese Communist spokesmen have begun to respond more directly to US charges that Hanoi's infiltration and supply activity is violating the Paris agreement. In a long and propaganda-laden press conference in Saigon on 17 March, the PRG's Tran Van Tra apparently acknowledged indirectly that infiltration has continued into the cease-fire period. Because the Communists are fighting a "protracted war against a strong and barbarous adversary," he said, they must have adequate troop reserves. On the subject of supply movement, Tra claimed that his side was "waiting for the settlement of question of points of entry" before replacing its military equipment.

On the same day in Hanoi, Colonel Ha Van Lau, formerly the second-ranking member of the North Vietnamese Paris delegation, acknowledged that the North was sending supplies to South Vietnam. He claimed, however, that only "food and medicine and other nonmilitary supplies" were involved and that Hanoi had the right to make such shipments under the terms of the agreement.

New Word from Le Duan

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The first sections of a new and massive article by First Secretary Le Duan are now available in Washington. So far the article, like other recent North Vietnamese pronouncements, appears to be concentrating on the need for improving the performance of key party members at all levels as the North embarks on a program of "socialist construction." There are hints that some sort of party purge is in the offing, and the article several times leaves the impression that the party is to involve itself more deeply in day-to-day administrative matters. These are initial impressions, of course, and are subject to modification as the rest of the text becomes available.

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